

Proven Inaction

“Too honest, too brutal, too prophetic?”

5 years ago I ended my introduction to the book *Total State Machine* with this mid-1980s verdict on Test Dept. Viewed with literal 2020 hindsight, it seems even more grimly relevant. It is not that Test Dept have *once again* been proven too prophetic, it is that over these 5 years they (and others who long ago anticipated the state of our “current affairs”) have *yet again* been proven to be too honestly prophetic. They are regularly vindicated by the proven and repeated inaction of what remains of the state in the face of entirely foreseeable threats.

Neglect and inaction yielded the carnage of Grenfell, which in itself is now dwarfed in scale by the mass deaths produced by the combination of the regime's malcompetence and its attempts at herd immunity. The consequences of violent deindustrialisation, privatisation and resurgent nationalism are all around us.

The titanic forces of the Thatcherite state that Test Dept battled with and *repeatedly* warned against in the 1980s have returned in even more shameless, but also farcical form. Much of the population perceives a neo-Churchillian statesman at the helm and yearns to submit to “God, King and Law”. If necessary, this populist submission must be at the cost not just of their and their own families' livelihoods, but even of their lives themselves. Much of the population happily collaborates in its own algorithmic battery farming and tabloidisation, prizing the inauthenticity and absurdity of their memetic positions and statements as tokens of authenticity and empowerment.

What Test Dept foresaw was the tragic potential of a resurgent English reactionary agenda but what they and we perhaps failed to foresee so clearly was the farcical potential and the way in which farcical populism could triumph. As perceptive observers noted during the rise of Mussolini and Hitler, the most absurd and ridiculous characters can become the most dangerous when backed by powerful corporate and financial forces. Absurdity even increases believers' affection and – as Adorno noted – the compulsion to “perform their own enthusiasm”, compensating for the inadequacies and logical contradictions of their leaders by being even more

vehement, shameless and absurd. The recent soft Trumpian putsch by armed protestors in Michigan is just the latest example of this. In the time of the “world kings”, the half-witted shall temporarily be king.

Test Dept still insisted on the laws of cause and effect and on consequences (often played out over decades). If x were allowed to happen now, y would surely and necessarily happen then, as we have seen and will continue to see. Yet 4 decades on, the exhausting, sometimes demoralising and dangerous (shock)work of warning now has more to deal with than the risks of being ignored, ridiculed or threatened. Their previous warnings were issued at a time when even the most rabid of their opponents rarely dared to so openly and joyfully deny the laws of cause, effect and reality itself. Warnings based on predictions of cause and effect make little impact on those who deny, refuse to acknowledge or are joyfully incapable of understanding “cause and effect” (the ideological symptoms of the “Hard Brexit” mentality).

When Test Dept returned with a new album in 2019, they attempted to confront disruption (the engine of digital neofeudalism) with disturbance (this was already prefigured in their 2017 London event *Assembly of Disturbance*). It's an uneven fight of course, but not an untimely one. This event and their shows here, in Europe and even Trump's America demonstrate the continued need and *demand* for artistically fuelled resistance.

Yet will all this renewed activity and anger also be in vain? No, because their previous actions and multiple ignored warnings were never in vain. To be largely unheeded is not the same as to be meaningless. New meanings were, are and will continue to be forged by this arduous shockwork. Decades ago, they set themselves up as “cold witnesses”, condemning but also anticipating the (self)-destructive trajectories of the forces they battled.

Even before the present depression, News Group Newspapers was facing a £68 million yearly loss from paying huge sums of phone hacking compensation. What it did with apparent impunity back then is costing it dearly now. This was followed in mid-April by a panicked campaign that saw Sun and other tabloid ‘journalists’ begging the public to save the industry from the impact of Corona on sales. Although

the “lockdown” here is far less stringent than elsewhere and call centre workers and others are classed as “key workers” not allowed to stay home, Tory donors are issuing increasingly panicked calls for a full-scale return to work on the grounds that an increase in the death rate will be less damaging (to them) than a continued slump in profits.

It turns out that while they can use military-grade disinformation and opinion management to try and deny it, cause and effect are reasserting themselves with a vengeance and those who took such delight in anti-democratic disruption are now heavily disrupted themselves. Their increased vehemence does not mean that they are not deeply disturbed – quite the opposite. It is rapidly dawning on them that it will be extremely hard to move swiftly “back to normal. Cause, effect and the laws of unintended consequence are “taking back control”

Just when it seemed more powerful than ever, in the wake of the 2019 general election, Johnson’s neofeudalist war machine is faltering, forced into enacting “socialist’ economic policies. VE Day, which should have been the regime’s Nuremberg moment, a neo-imperialist spectacle on a grand scale, was reduced to the farcical level of virus-spreading street parties and grown men running through the streets of Sheffield dressed as Spitfire and Hurricane fighter planes. Yet as Test Dept alluded to back in 1987, a good VE-Day night out was still enjoyed by the many who patriotically celebrated in overstretched casualty units by presenting with alcohol poisoning and head injuries , This “viral” patriotic farce was symbolically dwarfed by Test Dept’s *Our Finest Hour* spectacle in Vancouver 34 years before.

Elsewhere, Trump and Putin and the Saudi regime are feeling the sting of oil price collapse and while these regimes are likely to become more vicious in their attempts to cling on to power, the delayed shock effects of past decisions to weaken state infrastructure may accelerate out of their control. Entire industries and economic models are shaken to the core. In the era of *Disturbance* there is no longer no alternative. There is a viral moratorium on “no alternative” and even hard right-wing MPs and Telegraph commentators are starting to question the wisdom of being led through a global crisis by a cosplay Churchill.

Facts have become insurrectionary, intended and unintended consequences are running riot and entire states are being hollowed out by the second. It's a time of acute confrontations with mortality and reality, even as regimes try to massage away these inconveniently disruptive forces. New (though risky) possibilities are proliferating in the chaos and just as there is more for cold witnesses to observe, document and respond to, there may be productive (shock)work to be done amidst the unfolding chaos.

Keep honest, keep brutal, keep prophetic.

Alexei Monroe, London, May 2020.